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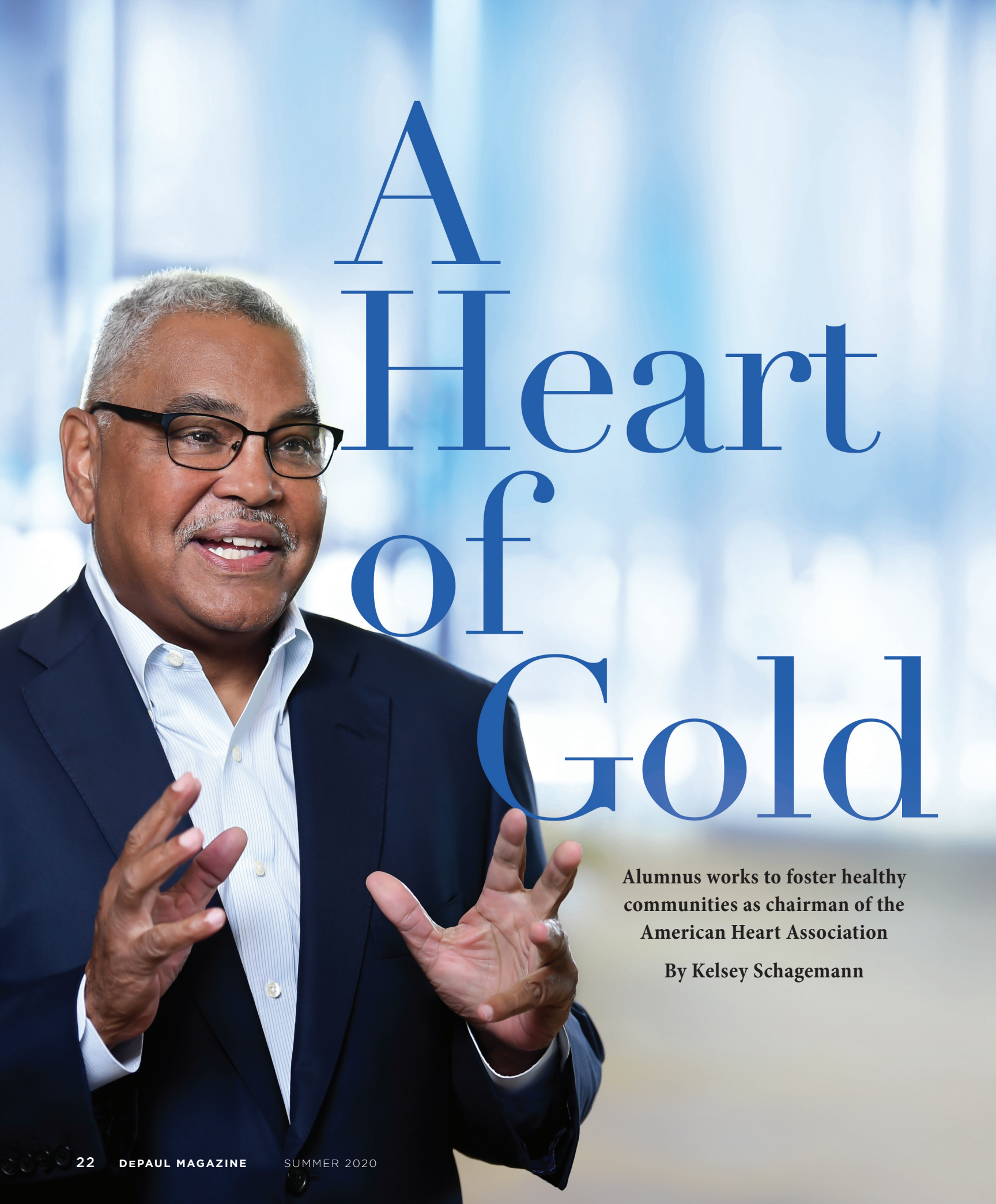
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A Heart of Gold

Alumnus works to foster healthy communities as chairman of the American Heart Association

By Kelsey Schagemann

Chicago has a life-expectancy problem. In Streeterville, residents live to be 90 years old on average. Nine miles south, in Englewood, however, residents are dying on average at age 60. This 30-year swing in mortality is the most extreme in the country, according to a 2019 report from the NYU School of Medicine.

These figures are upsetting, but unsurprising, to **Bertram “Bert” L. Scott (SCPS ’80, DHL ’09)**, a native of Chicago’s South Side and current chairman of the national board of the American Heart Association (AHA). After a lifetime spent working in health care and financial services, plus more than two decades of service to the AHA, Scott is well-versed in the major health issues plaguing the United States, especially those related to heart disease.

The path to leadership

Scott’s volunteer work for the AHA began with a personal tragedy. When Scott was in his mid-20s, his father passed away from a heart attack in his sleep. Subsequently, Scott participated in several fundraisers for the organization and eventually joined the local board in New York.

A second unexpected loss further deepened Scott’s connection to the AHA. His wife, Kathleen, died from a hemorrhagic stroke at age 52.

“That was very sudden and very traumatic for me and my children,” Scott says. He had four children at the time, ranging in age from 12 to 25.

Partly in response to that loss, Scott began directing his AHA gifts toward stroke research. He also ramped up his commitment to the organization in other ways. For the past decade, he has served on the national board of directors. He became chairman in October.

While the chairman role brings new

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responsibilities, volunteer leadership positions have been a major part of Scott’s life for a long time. He has held numerous service positions at DePaul over the years, beginning in 2000 when Scott was invited to join the Advisory Council at the School for New Learning (now the School of Continuing and Professional Studies). The end of that six-year term overlapped with Scott’s first few months on DePaul’s Board of Trustees.

Scott looks back fondly on his 11 years with the Board of Trustees; when he retired from the Board in 2016, he was named a Life Trustee. During those years, DePaul was engaged in a major fundraising campaign, and Scott remembers how the Board came together to help raise additional scholarship dollars for students.

“We wanted to reinforce our mission of appealing to those first-generation college students,” he says. “We needed to make DePaul relevant to those students, both academically and financially.”

While there was consensus around that issue, other topics sparked lively debate among the trustees, such as conversations about free speech on campus and how much emphasis should be placed on DePaul’s Catholic identity.

The rigor with which the trustees approached serious topics appealed to Scott and ultimately helped prepare him to serve as AHA chairman many years later.

“One thing I learned is how to interact with other trustees who are equally passionate but may have a different approach to getting things done,” Scott says. “You have to figure out how to work with different personalities.”

Scott has been thinking about this quite a bit as AHA chairman, noting that “you don’t always have to agree, but you have to make room for each person to have his or her point of view heard.”

“That’s the role of leadership,” he adds.

A plan for improving health

Scott has set four ambitious goals for his two-year term at the AHA. First, he would like to raise additional fundraising dollars to support AHA’s research arm. “This is always top of my list because research leads to improved care, services and solutions,” he says.

A second goal, which only recently became more pressing, is putting a stop to the vaping crisis. The AHA is collaborating with other groups, such as the Coalition for Tobacco-Free Children and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, to address this issue.

Another goal is to encourage people of color to become more actively involved in the organization. Non-Hispanic black adults are at greater risk of death from heart disease than any other ethnic group, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Scott’s final goal hearkens back to that 30-year mortality gap in Chicago neighborhoods: focusing attention on the social determinants of health.

“Eighty percent of the things that affect your health have nothing to do with disease,” Scott says. “It’s where you live, what you eat, where you work, the environment you’re in.”

Location and economic status can play a major role in an individual’s ability to live a healthy life. Whether or not one lives in a food desert, has timely access to health care, possesses health insurance and has received training on what to do in a cardiac emergency all factor into one’s life expectancy.

As Scott sees it, raising awareness about the social determinants of health is only the first step. “We can talk ad nauseam, but I don’t have a lot of patience for that,” Scott says. “It’s about doing something. How can we get into communities and work with people already there?”

The economics of health care

Scott is no stranger to goal-setting. Throughout his impressive career, he has helped hospital systems and health and life insurance companies tackle major challenges. As CEO of Affinity Health Plan in New York, which covers patients on Medicaid and Medicare, Scott was charged with increasing health care access and improving patients’ understanding of disease while ensuring that the company still made a profit.

Affinity accomplished these objectives in part by investing in preventive care resources. “If a new medication came out for hepatitis C and it was a very expensive drug, it was still better to make sure all our patients were taking that drug than to treat that same patient 10 years later when he or she might be extremely ill with liver disease,” Scott says.

During Scott’s time at Affinity, the company introduced new ways to reimburse physicians, increased pay for primary care physicians and created disease management programs.

When Scott later joined Novant Health, an integrated delivery system of hospitals, clinics and physicians in Charlotte, N.C., he encountered different challenges in his role

as senior vice president of population health and value-based care.

“Going from the payer side to the provider side, I realized there are programs put in place by the insurance companies that can sometimes become a barrier to delivering care,” he says. For example, the practice of precertification—where a provider must request approval from an insurance company before performing a procedure or prescribing a drug—can become an administrative hassle.

Ultimately, Scott says having this dual perspective made him a better leader. It also helped him craft some practical advice for patients.

“You really need to be an advocate for yourself,” he urges. “Do not be intimidated by the system. Ask questions. There is no such thing as a dumb question when it comes to your health.”

Scott acknowledges that it can be difficult to speak up, but he counts himself fortunate that he came from parents who always encouraged him. “I never felt like I couldn’t do something,” Scott says. “That’s a gift that not everyone gets.”

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The right moves

Raised in Chicago’s Chatham neighborhood, Scott graduated from Lindblom Technical High School and briefly attended college in Wisconsin before homesickness drove him back to the Windy City.

Scott obtained a job at Prudential Financial, but soon realized that the most successful people at the company had an undergraduate degree at a minimum. Faced with this reality, Scott decided to study business administration at DePaul’s School for New Learning.

“I needed a program that allowed me the flexibility to be a student and work a responsible, full-time job,” Scott says.

It turned out to be a perfect fit. Scott found mentors among the administration and faculty, as well as classmates who also had experience in the working world. Quickly, Scott was able to apply things he learned in the classroom to his job at Prudential, and he carried those skills with him throughout the rest of his career.

“Without that experience, I’m sure my career would have been very different and likely not as successful,” Scott says.

Looking back, Scott can pinpoint a few other key moments and experiences that helped shape the course of his life and career. A supervisor and mentor at Prudential taught Scott an important lesson about obligation and accountability. When Harold Washington was running to become Chicago mayor in 1983, Scott announced his intention to volunteer for the campaign. The supervisor told him it was a great idea, but he had to make sure he continued to perform at a high level in his job.

Scott volunteered evenings and weekends, working as part of Washington's advance team to make sure everything was in place for campaign events. "By the end, I was exhausted," he says. But the long hours paid off. "It was a terrific experience," he says. "And I delivered my goals at Prudential that year—which was what I had to do. I couldn't drop the ball on that."

Later, Scott nearly missed a professional growth opportunity because he was too stubborn to take a job interview with the financial services organization TIAA-CREF. For two months, the company asked to meet with him, and Scott refused. "I was looking for another health care position," Scott explains. "I didn't know anything about the company, and I didn't really want to be involved in life insurance. I suspect it was arrogance in me as well."

Once Scott finally relented and learned what the opportunity entailed, he was sold. He spent 10 years honing his financial acumen and leadership skills at TIAA-CREF while developing a better understanding of the consumer market. "I tested myself in a different business and gained mentors who helped prepare me to dive back into health insurance later on," he says.



A heart full of gratitude

Scott is now retired, but he says his five children would dispute this fact. "What's that old adage? If you want something done, find somebody who's already busy," he jokes. In addition to the AHA, Scott also serves on the boards of a medical technology company, a large HMO, a financial services company and a home improvement store. Plus, he enjoys his ongoing volunteer work on DePaul's philanthropy committee.

"I don't care what door you come in at DePaul or what door you go out of—

as you pass through, you learn the Vincentian traditions," Scott says. "I am forever grateful for that." In tandem with his parents' focus on giving back, Scott developed a strong affinity for philanthropy and volunteer work thanks to DePaul.

"Even with the losses in my life, I still feel very blessed," Scott says. "I've been way more successful than I ever thought I wanted to be, and when you've been given a lot, I think you have an obligation to give back."

With a smile, he says, "It's part of my DNA." That may be so, but it clearly originates in his generous heart.